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Note on Psalm cxxi. i.

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THE R.V. has here correctly followed the Hebrew text in making the second clause interrogative. This construction gives a more logical sequence in the thought, the direct question, "From whence cometh my help?" being followed by its answer, "My help cometh from the Lord"; whereas in the A.V. we have the psalmist's statement that his help cometh from the hills (R.V. "mountains," Heb. הַרִים) followed by the seemingly contradictory, or at least non-sequent, statement that his help cometh from another source, namely, the Lord. I say seemingly contradictory, for it must be admitted that we have here no necessary contradiction. The usual interpretation which makes this a case of parallelism, in whose first member the psalmist finds his help in the mountains as the symbol, and in the second member finds it in Jehovah as the real source of strength, has abundant warrant in biblical methods of thought. In Old Testament times as well as to-day, devout minds found inspiration in mountain scenery (Ps. 95⁴). The everlasting hills have always suggested God's eternity, strength, and majesty, and His overshadowing presence and protection. It is strengthening to look upon them.

But was this the psalmist's thought in our passage? A very different thought may be found in the verse if we go a step further than the R.V. and render the first clause also as interrogative, a construction which, though rare in Hebrew, is permissible, the use of the affirmative form in an interrogative sense without an interrogative particle (cf. 2 Sam. 16¹⁷; Zech. 8⁶; and possibly 2 Sam. 23⁵; and Is. 1¹⁸, where the context seems to favor this interpretation), especially where the idea of surprise or protest is implied. Rendering the main verb שָׁאָה as an interrogative of indignant protest, we may then read the thought, 'Shall I lift up mine eyes unto the mountains [high places, the seats of idolatrous worship]? Nay, verily, from whom cometh my help? My help cometh from Yahweh which made heaven and earth.'

It is consonant with this interpretation that such high places were consecrated to idolatrous rites upon the mountains (הַרִים), as by Solomon (1 K. 11⁷ 2 K. 23¹³), and by Jehoram (2 Chron. 21¹¹), upon the same mountains referred to in Ps. 125² as "round about Jerusalem." The context also supports this view.

The proper historical setting for the psalm may be found in the great reformation under Josiah (2 K. 23). When this energetic king undertook to "put down the *chemarim* whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah and in the places round about Jerusalem; them also that burned incense unto Baal, to the sun, and to the moon, and to the planets, and to all the host of heaven" (2 K. 23⁵), there must have been many timid souls who dreaded the vengeance of the gods thus summarily cut off from their share in the popular worship and ejected from their high places as things of nought. The psalm may well have been written to comfort and fortify these doubting ones in this trying time.

The psalmist would teach them first the source of his strength: not the gods of the mountain tops whom they had been wont to worship and fear, whose powers were limited to the earth or upper air, to the day or to the night, but Jahweh, the maker of heaven and earth. Fear them not, therefore, for He is all powerful, and neither slumbers in the daytime nor sleeps at night. Fear not, therefore, the vengeance of Shamash, the deposed sun god, in thy going out of the city to labor in the fields through the heat of the day; nor the vengeance of Yareaḥ, the moon god, when in the gathering dusk thou hast occasion to pass by his desecrated altars in thy coming in again to the city. For Yahweh is thy keeper, and He is mightier than they all. He will preserve thee from all evil. Thou art under His protection, who is now, henceforth, and forever thy one and only God.